

THE KŪDITCHA SHOES OF CENTRAL AUSTRALIA.

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It is now known that certain tribes of the Aborigines towards the centre of the Continent manufacture a very beautiful shoe, chiefly composed of emu feathers. Two entirely different uses have been ascribed to these. On the one hand, the late Mr. E. M. Curr stated* that the Blacks of the Musgrave Ranges wear the shoes "when they attack their enemies by stealth at night." On the other hand, Mr. C. French, Government Entomologist, Melbourne, has more recently referred† them to a portion of the stock-in-trade of the "rain-maker" of the MacDonnell Ranges.

I am indebted to Mr. H. Y. L. Brown, Government Geologist of South Australia, for a pair of these very interesting articles, procured from Barrow Creek, near Central Mount Stuart, on the Overland Telegraph Line. As I have never seen a detailed description of these novel articles of native apparel, a few notes on the subject will probably be of interest.

The Musgrave Blacks, according to Curr, call the slippers *Kooditcha*, and assume them with the view of preventing the wearer from being tracked. "It is," says Curr, "only on the softest ground that they leave any mark, and even then it is impossible to distinguish the heel from the toe; so that the Blacks say they can track anything that walks, except a man shod with *Kooditcha*." This word signifies an invisible spirit, hence the adoption of the name to the shoes.

The entirely different use ascribed to these articles by Mr. French is expressed by him in the following words:—"It is believed amongst the natives of certain tribes in Central Australia

* The Australian Race, 1886, i. p. 148.

† Vic. Nat. 1892, ix. No. 6, p. 79.

that droughts are caused by the swallowing up of all moisture by a rain-devil. If, however, this personage can be captured and made to disgorge, rain follows at once. The feather boots are worn by the native rain-maker in order that he may steal noiselessly and unawares on the author of the drought and consequent misery."

The shoes are ten inches in length, by four inches wide, the sole being about two inches thick. The groundwork is, as stated by Curr, made of human hair, and in the sole thickly interlaced and matted together with emu feathers to such an extent that the latter predominate over the former. The uppers, however, are wholly of hair-twine, knitted together, with an occasional feather thrust in here and there. The free sides are from one to one and a quarter inches high, whilst the toe and heel portions are covered or decked-in as it were, leaving a foot-opening, oval in shape, and six inches long, but what I take to be toe-cap longer than the heel-piece. The shoes are held on the feet by instep straps, not unlike the similar fastenings to a child's shoe. The straps are excentric with regard to the longitudinal measurement, and are near to what I take to be the heel, the other end being certainly a trifle wider, and are also made of hair-string whipped upon itself. Curr says that the component materials of the soles are "stuck together with a little human blood, which the maker is said to take from his arm." There is certainly some black coagulated substance mixed with the feathers and hair in the soles of the shoes from Barrow Creek. This my colleague, Dr. T. Cooksey, has submitted to chemical examination, and made the following tests:—

1. A portion was extracted with glacial acetic acid, and the extract evaporated with a little sodium-chloride, when micro-crystals of hæmine-hydrochloride were obtained.

2. A second portion was boiled with acetic acid and diluted, and on the addition of ferro-cyanide of potassium, albumen was precipitated.

These results would appear to indicate that the black cementing medium is blood.

It is of course difficult to adjudicate between the rival statements of Messrs. Curr and French—whether the slippers are used in blood revenge, or rain-making. We now know only too well the superstitions entertained by the Aborigines over the whole Continent regarding the cause of death, and the action almost universally taken to avenge that of a near relative or connection. We are likewise acquainted with many and varied extraordinary proceedings adopted, in their belief, to produce rain. So far as I am aware, however, the use of shoes in either of these directions has not been recorded, with the exception of the two quotations already given. Under these circumstances, I felt I could not do better than consult my ever obliging friend, Mr. A. W. Howitt, whose knowledge of the habits of many of the Central Australian Tribes is second to none. Mr. Howitt, who possesses a pair of these shoes from Charlotte Waters, wrote me as follows:—"It is said they are used by the 'Doctors' when seeking out the evil being who has swallowed the rain, and thus caused droughts. I never knew of them in the Cooper's Creek Tribes, and I doubt very much whether they were used in the *Pinja*, but the Yantrowinta (Cooper's Creek) told me that when they went on their expeditions to obtain *Pitcheri* they passed through country where there were people whose tracks were the same before and behind. I have also thought their statement referred to the tribe in which the *Kūditcha* shoes were used by the 'Doctors.' The same custom probably extends north and south of Charlotte Waters, even down to the Peake and up to the Finke River. From the latter place I learn that the tribes and customs over the area referred to are similar, if not the same."

Mr. Howitt's supposition that the use of the *Kūditcha* shoes extends to the north of Charlotte Waters is quite borne out by the locality of the present slippers, Barrow Creek being a very considerable distance to the north of that place.

In a second and later communication Mr. Howitt tells me "that the feather shoes are also said to be worn at Charlotte Waters by men who mean to kill others, and that where such

tracks are seen about people are much alarmed, but do not follow them, the wearers being tabooed."

It would appear, therefore, from the information supplied by Mr. Howitt, that the *Kūditcha* shoes are almost certainly used by the rain-maker, and possibly also by the authorised agents in attaining blood-revenge. At the same time, thinking it very desirable that definite information should be obtained from the most reliable local source, I communicated with Mr. J. J. East, Registrar of the School of Mines, &c., Adelaide, and who possesses the advantage of several years' experience in Central Australia.

Mr. East has most obligingly sent me a very interesting cutting from the Adelaide *Evening Journal* of Dec. 3rd, 1892, on the "Curious Customs of the Natives of Central Australia," by R.O. This he has supplemented with his personal experience and views.

Mr. East informs me that "R.O." is an old bushman named Richard Oldfield, and that Mr. Thomas Gill, the Under Treasurer of S. Australia, well known for his Ethnological and Bibliographical researches, has full faith in the authenticity of his statements.

Mr. Oldfield's account of these shoes is as follows, when speaking of inter-tribal wars:—"Should it happen that one of the tribes is greatly superior in numbers to the other, the weaker tribe invites one of the young warriors of the opposite tribe to hunt in their country for a euro, or kangaroo, at the same time sending one of their own tribe to hunt in the country of the stronger tribe. The warrior of the weaker tribe crosses the boundary line into the country of the stronger tribe, and after proceeding a mile or two he doubles back, and finding the track of the other warrior, he puts on a pair of large soft shoes made out of emu feathers, stuck together with blood, gum, &c. As these shoes leave no track the natives call them Kooditcha shoes (Kooditcha means devil). With these appendages he follows the tracks of his adversary with extreme care and caution, until his victim has killed a euro, and when the unsuspecting man is busily engaged in securing the euro, the warrior with the Kooditcha shoes steals up silently and spears him in a vital place. Having despatched his victim, he immediately obtains a firestick, and while the body is still warm

he applies the firestick to the wound, taking care not to scorch the flesh. By this means he causes the wound to rapidly heal up outwardly, and no trace of any external wound can then be found. Having accomplished his object, he travels back in a circuitous way, and killing another euro himself, he takes it to his own tribe. The opposite tribe seeing that their warrior does not return, send out in search, when several of the tribe are invited over the boundary to look for him. They soon track him and find his body with the euro he had killed, but as no wound can be seen, nor can they find any evidence of his death, they conclude that Kooditcha has seized him, and as Kooditcha appears to be in the locality and may seize others of their tribe, they hasten away with all despatch. By stratagem, aided by superstition, the weaker tribes secure their ends without losing any of their number, and a war is averted."

Mr. East next informs me that he cannot agree with Mr. Oldfield that the word *Kūditcha* means devil. He says:—"The name is foreign, as I believe, and I am of opinion that both the article and its use is an importation from the Queensland Blacks."

My informant likewise reminds me that Mounted-Constable W. H. Wilshire, in his interesting pamphlet "The Aborigines of Central Australia,"* speaks of the devil, or the Aboriginal conception answering to his Satanic Majesty, as *Arumya*. In his own interesting account† of the Central Tribes, Mr. East also makes use of this term, "Their religious ideas are very primitive, believing only in an evil spirit or *Arumya*." In that most extraordinary of tribes, the *Dieyerie*, the word for devil, or evil spirit, is *Kootchie*,‡ whilst in the MacDonnell Ranges the term *Eringa* is used. Mr. East concludes that Mr. Oldfield has erred in translating the word *Kūditcha* into devil, from its apparent resemblance to the term employed in the well-known *Dieyerie* dialect.

* P. 10 (16mo. Adelaide, 1888).

† The Aborigines of South and Central Australia, p. 9 (16mo. Adelaide, 1889).

‡ Police-Trooper S. Gason—The Manners and Customs of the *Dieyerie* Tribe of Australian Aborigines. *Wood's Native Tribes of S. Australia*, 1879, pp. 284 and 299.

I will now give the remainder of Mr. East's interesting statement in his own words :—

“Mr. Tom Coward, now of Adelaide, but formerly of the Queensland and South Australian Police, tells me that the slippers properly belong to the tribes occupying the inland slope of the Queensland Cordillera, and their principal use is to *disguise tracks when ‘wife hunting.’* The abductor must conceal himself in the neighbourhood of the camp, but once he has obtained his bride speed is the urgent need of the moment. My own informants—the native black trackers—say they are used to disguise tracks and that rain-makers also *sometimes* use them. On all points, I have come to the conclusion that their use is not general, and hence can have no great ethnological significance.

“Mr. Coward states that the feathers are stuck together with a pitchy substance similar to that used for fastening spear heads. (This in Central Australia is obtained by burning spinifex and digging up the pitch from the sand around the roots.)

“The pair of slippers or ‘Cooditchies’ (as I have spelled it) in our Museum are not made in this manner, but are built at the soles by tying the tufts of feathers together with a white string apparently the same as that used by the natives of Stuart's Creek (L. Eyre) in the manufacture of aprons. (These aprons are made from the fibres of the cotton bush mixed with human hair.) The upper part is made of netting formed by twisting human hair with a brown fibre which resembles cocoanut fibre in appearance.

“The collection of a sufficient quantity of netting to make these slippers must have occupied a very long time, and is a valid reason why they are not common or in general use.

“In conclusion, I would suggest that the primary use of the slippers is not to hide tracks, but simply to disguise the direction in which the traveller went. The stony tablelands of Central Australia and the rocky ranges reveal few signs of a nature which even a blackfellow can trace as footprints, but at intervals a river channel must be crossed, and here the Aboriginal is confronted with an obstacle which in other countries can be turned to advantage. The Finke, Goyder, Hamilton, &c., are typical of the

Central Australian rivers, and their dry channels are filled with a white sand analogous to that of the sea shore. No track can be hidden here. All that can be done is to cause uncertainty as regards the direction. Time is the great factor for the fugitive. It is known whence he came and to where he will return, but were these the outward or the returning tracks? While this point is being cleared up by a circle of observations, the fugitive gets back to his own tribe and is no longer in *individual* danger. The customary challenge and tribal fight ensues, and peace follows."

Tucked inside each of the shoes from Barrow Creek, both at the toes and heels, I found several examples of a well-marked *Helix*, that Mr. Charles Hedley informs me is *H. perinflata*, Pf., a characteristic desert species hitherto known to range from the MacDonnell Ranges to the Victoria Desert, W.A. Whether these shells are fortuitous, or were placed in the shoes by their former sable owner for some occult reason, I am unable to say. My informant, Mr. Brown, was unable to solve the riddle, but simply says that the shells were in the shoes when he obtained them; and further that the Blacks of this part of the country eat snails as we do oysters, but after cooking them. He saw a number of camps, one hundred miles west-nor-west of Oodnadatta where a feast had taken place.